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ABSTRACT

Tautologies in student essays, arguments that most commonly assume the truth or self-evidence of themselves without relationship to something other than themselves, can be identified whenever an essay contains a series of nonsuccessive, noncumulative discourse units. Three kinds of tautologies in student papers are tautologies of redundancy, tautologies of substitution, and tautologies of agency. Some solutions are (1) using the ways of defining--opposing, comparing differentiating, and translating; (2) comparing summaries and paraphrases in terms of distinctions made, concepts formed, and inclusivity; (3) having a transformational sense of words and sentences; and (4) breaking equivalency chains by examining assumptions underlying the assertion of equivalency and by emphasizing differences. (EL)

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Barriers To Discourse: Tautologies In Student Essays

All of these barriers we have seen so vividly demonstrated here this afternoon are translated, transmuted, transmogrified into something completely intransitive and intransigent: tautologies in student essays. Given the cues and rewards of academia, it is little wonder that students are loathe to explore the geneses and premises of their arguments. Instead, they are quick to assume an argument, and prone to see it as self-evident.

As Chaim Perelman argues, assuming that your audience will agree with your premises and even understand your key terms is to beg the question, no matter how strong your thesis. All too often, students take for granted the very thing which needs establishing, the very term or premise which holds the key to their essay. Once they have committed this what Perelman calls "gravest of faults," they are left wandering in the context of no context, the realm of tautology. Mistaking the word for the thing; seeing thought as more of an object than an instrument; taking an idea for granted and granting it autonomous life and purchasing power--this is the genesis of student tautologies, home to the elusive, amorphous, all-purpose thesis and the ever-shifting subject.

In their stead, I want to hint at a kind of speculative rhetoric based partly on dialectical thesis-building and partly on a sense of writing as as interpetive act rather than a reductive routine. But first let me try to define tautologies and give some examples.

Before launching, student-like, into my categories (usually the third or fourth paragraph of the essay), let me offer a split-level, working definition of a tautology. I am not going to identify it as "That which argues in a circle"--for that would be a tautoogical definition, as would saying that it is a proposition in which that which constitutes the premise is redistributed in the conclusion. Both definitions miss the mark because they fail to take purpose into account, and purpose determines identity.

Rather, tautologies most commonly assume the truth or self-evidence of themselves without relation to something other than themselves; they lack self-consciousness, or interpretive distance on themselves or their genesis. They can be identified whenever an essay contains a series of non-successive, non-cumulative discourse units, usually a whole paper full of non-sequitur paragraphs.

Note: Examples cited by number in parentheses are listed on handout at back of article.

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THE INFERNAL CIRCLES OF TAUTOLOGY I: REDUNDANCY

First, there are the classic howlers we see every day.

(1) and (2)

These actually have a sort of progression: the first example (they are remembered because they are remembered) shows the "because" as "equals" sign between null sets-not really a sign at all since it stands for nothing beyond the first part of the sentence. There is no movement into the rest of the sentence or into the next sentence--which itself will have to begin to build a proposition of some sort. This is a redundancy and absurdum because they are absolutely non-conducting. Unlike "Boys will be boys" or "business is business," apparent tautologies which can lead to meaning because the identity between subject and predicate is not as absolute as it appears, here the identity is absolute.

In (3), another null set, here is at least a misleading modicum of specificity and direction. Its notions are coherent, if so general as to be rendered useless. Since it moves slightly beyond saying that Montaigne represented the Renaissance because he exemplified it, let us call it something else: redundancy ad generalum.

The (4) example is question-begging-as-confidence game. It substitutes a truism for a proposition, but excludes the middle (the Renaissance has no substance of its own-it is only a "hinge")-so it is a redundancy and obscurum, trying to persuade by mystification.

(5) and (6) are also halls-of-mirrors of a slightly higher order, but all share the hallmarks of this species: an animal is a person because it has a right to life, and it has a right to life because it is a person; soldiers are just because they are just. Since none of the terms are defined, there is no way to trace their genesis or use them in an interpretive manner. They are true wild cards--all actions could be called just or none in the second example, just as in (5) any characteristic could be linked to personhood.

The tautology of redundancy is above all carte blanche to have your concept mean anything it wants.

II-THE SECOND CIRCLE--SUBSTITUTION

These are more sophisticated tautologies which shift the question from term to term in a round-robin evasive tactic, creating a kind of free-floating discourse marker. For example, students asked to reflect on Thucydides' portrayal of the Athenian tragic character came up with arguments such as (7).

There are, of course, an infinite number of concepts that can be substituted for, or linked tinker-toy fashion to, a general term like "tragic." Synonym-as-paraphrase is often rewarded, but hardly does the job. Unless students define "sad," or say what their proposition has to do with tragedy or Thucydides, their list-mongering, their descriptive catalogue, could go on forever, but never get them into the circle of meaning. They are diagramming their escape from the circle of tautology, but not effecting it. Call this the substitution-by-synonym.

If pressed, better students repeart the game, sometimes through several transferrences: tragic because sad; sad because entails suffering, etc. These chains most always end up at their point of origin: entails suffering, so is tragic. Like all writers caught in the grip of deep tautology, these writers are under the illusion they have completed a journey, when they have actually only simulated one.

A cousin of the synonym maze is the generic substitution: the Athenians in Thucydides were justified because they had power to protect; the other Greek states resented Athens because it had too much power; and the war was caused because Athens had too much power. To students, this seems like an airtight case that Athenian power is the catch-all answer, but, in essence, this is really a perpetual motion machine, explaining everything and nothing. How has the power amassed, and perpetuated? Was it perceived as the same kind of power by both sides? What kinds of relations did its creation presuppose and create? What benefits did it offer?

. Is power a bad thing? How did the Greeks perceive the word? Such questions must be answered for the writer to get anywhere.

It is a common misstep here, by the way, to assume that this problem can be solved by expansion or explanation of the "whats", rather than modification of their very nature. In this case "more" would be less because what needs explaining is the "why," which also needs to be related to the writer's purpose. In other words, only meanings which grow out of purposes and contexts can mould reactions to themselves. Otherwise, essays are a chain of boxcars.

These false equivalency chains, in which the basis for assumption or conclusion is never explained, are most common in arguments like the following and to stop the chain and examine any of the equivalencies might have led the writer to some focus--an examination of how responsibility leads to initiative, for example. But this is a menu, not a meal. In (9), property ownership is assumed to define success. The problem here is th t the term "property rights" is not distributed so as to serve as a unit of analysis, just as Athenian power wasn't.

A third variation of these substitute propositions is the split-level or multiphasic (10). These passages contradict themselves by pursuing two mutually-exclusive lines of argument, each traveling in an eccentric circle: in (10), "utopian" and "self love" seem headed on a collision course, and in (11), people in a utopia would act the same because they wouldn't all accept the same norms, and they wouldn't all accept these norms because they would all act the same.

INFERNAL CIRCLES 3: AGENCY

Verbs are the crux here. This is the land of phantom agents, causes, and conditions: (12) (13). Such false agency chains switch from verb to verb without awareness that they have switched from direct to indirect causation ("is the source of" changes to "influences," or something having rights is suddenly being given those rights). After a while, it is impossible to know what is affecting (or effecting) what; who the actors are; or even what the actions themselves are. This usually happens when

writer's purpose has been left behind, and passive voice is filling the void--who or what is bringing together such daunting abstract forces? The failure to move from atomization to integration is most often reflected in this particular kind of tautology, where the actors cricle back on themselves and become recipients of actions; or where causes become effects. These false agency chains can always be read backwards with no loss in meaning--and, of course, with no gain either.

Focussing is a way out of this dilemma. As terms are carefully distinguished from one another, and definitions established, a certain amount of tension should accrue in a paper--a tension synonymous with meaning-making. If definition, comparison, narrowing, and explanation have been carried out on the same set of terms, all in the context of the writer's purpose, these operations should generate interdependent ranges of meaning. For example, (12) could avoid its empty assertions of phantom agency by restricting and defining "consciousness," comparing it to plan "perception," explaining how it is modified by social interaction, etc. In (13), "rationalization" needs defining. The word is not the thing, after all.

SOME SOLUTIONS

A> Representation, not presentation. Since the word is not the thing, the aim should be to break words down as far and as often as possible. As Cassirer puts it, "The Concept, in accordance with its characteristic attitude, must, unlike direct perception, move its object off into a kind of ideal distance in order to bring it into its horizon. The concept must annul "presence" in order to arrive at "representation."

So, all the usual ways of defining: opposing, comparing, differentiating, translating (renaming) should be a help, but only and always with an eye on purpose, with concept formation uppermost in mind, moving from precept to concept.

Other useful strategies: comparing summaries and paraphrases in terms of distinctions made, concepts formed, and inclusivity; looking for salient features of a certain kind of discourse, and comparing findings, or looking at how different kinds of books (encyclopedias, textbooks, special studies) define and discuss the same idea--any activity where defining itself is a wide open interpretive activity.

Another way to get them to think about representation: the notion of the real discussion or terms of engagement being removed from material-at-hand's features-how your concept is a non-given, is only implicit.

B> Dialectic, not demonstration. In order to overcome the creation of non-successive structures, a dialogic model is essential, a transformational sense of words and sentences. Get students to see abstractions and oppositions as ways into a subject and as propositions to be mitigated; get them to make borderlines in order to transcend them; get them to see words as bearing the seeds of their own transformations; get them to see what Iser means when he says "A sentence can only achieve its end by aiming at something beyond itself."

C) Relationships, Not Synonyms or Cause and Effect. Break all equivalency chains by examining assumptions underlying the assertion of equivalency and by emphasizing differences. Look carefully at all verbs used at key corner-turning moments when these equivalencies are being made. Always posit an alternative to a cause and effect assertion.

D) Triadicity: Peirce-
1. Simultaneous reference to three things
2. Analyze relations by studying how verbs function to form triads.
3. Work backwards from final cause so that purpose determines identity. Let purpose determine meaning, and meaning determine the structure and function of constituents.
4. Separate sensations accompanying a thought from the thought itself.
5. Don't mistake accretions for parts--move from familiarity to definition to habit
6. Cultivate doubt. Write about your doubts, not your main arguments.

COHERENCE, COHESION, MACROSTRUCTURES AND METADISCOURSE

I have one further claim to make about tautology: that while it appears to be partly a matter of coherence--since the overall proposition usually lacks meaning: and partly a matter of cohesion--since the sentence by sentence relations are often assume rather than explained--in actuality, tautologies can be both cohesive and coherent and still lack any speculative powers, still be empty shells. Just as a paragraph can be cohesive but not coherent, so can an entire essay be coherent but not speculative.

Text in Halliday and Hassan is "a basic unit of meaning in language" an authentic, complete, contextually relevant interpretable instance of discourse. txt-forming relationships occur when one unit needs another unit for understanding. These networks of semantic rerlationships crerate the cohesive quality of discourse. Yet even given all the various schema generated for determining cohesion--admirably summed up by Sandra Stotsky in the December, 1983 CCC--reiteration, collocation, semantically related words, repetiion, synonymity, opposition, contextuality and all the rest--speculative discourse is still not guaranteed. The only guarantee of speculative discourse is a sense of relation, a theory of signs that includes the interpreter from the outset inside the problem. You must start from an epistemologically-privileged position, in other words, to begin to play the game in all these wonderfully complex ways coherence and cohesion theorists are providing us. Something must be determinant from the start for coherence to be possible. As Peirce puts it, "Meaning consists in moulding reactions to itself." It imparts a quality to reactions in the future--it is a form of consciousness. And consciousness provides tendency and determination--the conscious will that produces learning.

In other words, without a theory of signs--of x meaning z to y, then coherence and cohesion are mere aesthetic criteria, the essay is still being approached as an object rather than a symbol: expression is still understood as the display of ideas rather than the pursuit of logical form.

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TAUTOLOGIES IN STUDENT PAPERS

I--Tautologies of Redundancy

(1) Some of the periods are more remembered than others because of the reminders they've left behind.

(2) People form groups because of a social impulse.

(3) Montaigne was a representative figure in the Renaissance because he exemplified it by having an open mind and being flexible to changing thoughts and values.

(4) Montaigne's views of these ideas are very Renaissance-like because it was when medieval thought was dropped and modern thought taken up.

(5) Some people may argue for the right to life of an animal on the same grounds as the right to life of a fetus. The obvious argument for an animal to be a person with a right to life is that an animal is a conscious organism, aware of the world around it, and by the simple fact that it is aware, an animal is therefore a person and has a right to life.

(6) If a person is just in his initial actions (i.e., going to war), he will tend to act justly throughout the situation. If a person is unjustified in his initial actions, however, he will have no reason to act justly throughout the rest of the situation. In the Six Day War, the Israelis were justified in going to war and fought a just war throughout. In Vietnam, the Americans had no justification for going to war, and thus fought unjustly throughout.

II--Tautologies of Substitution

(7) Athenian thought is tragic because it's sad
it entails suffering
it's about death

(over)

(8) Of the general type of employee ownership, the cooperative is the most successful in increasing morale, productivity, and employee involvement in the decision-making process. They are more self-reliant because they have a better attitude. This increased satisfaction comes because they are more involved, and so this responsibility gives them better morale.

(9) With goals of efficiency and productivity, how could we ever do away with property rights? Property rights, expectations of what we can and can't do, are incentives for effective competition and thus cooperation. Competition and cooperation are the keys to efficiency and production. Therefore, we should keep property rights because they are the building blocks of success.

(10) Squabbling between governments holds us back. We must bridge our differences by speaking one language, using one monetary system, and, finally, combining all culture to form one unified mass. The main goal of this society should be goodwill towards all. Love for others, however, begins with oneself and so this society should stress the individual emotional makeup and inner being, and not outward appearance.

(11) In the ideal utopian society everyone would think and act the same. In reality, though, most people are not as conforming as that. There is a norm that most people accept and follow. But in a utopia there wouldn't be a need for such a norm.

III--Tautologies of Agency

(12) Since man's consciousness is influenced by social existence, and social existence is influenced by consciousness, there is a mutual interaction between the two. This reciprocal influence accounts for social change, and change in the way people perceive things.

(13) Weber asserts that ultimate and proximate concepts are often rationalized so that one justifies the existence of the other. If they are rationalized, then the two can live in harmony. Social ethics are often justified by religious values. Conversely, the existence of a particular religious doctrine might be justified by certain social principles. The continuous rationalization of religious and secular ideas brings about social change.